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Four Poems by Yoshiko Hanabusa

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Four Poems by Yoshiko Hanabusa

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Rina Kikuchi
Four Poems by Hanabusa Yoshiko

Hanabusa Yoshiko

The State of My Day

一日のすがた

Sitting on the dresser

A box of *Shikishima* cigarettes, gloves, a plastic pinwheel,
Karukasu cracker crumbs, postcards and calling cards

More and more things there too

A train ticket, a half-used ball of yarn,
A wallet, a sachet of *Ryūkakusan* cough medicine,
A fountain pen, a handkerchief dried in the sun

When night falls and the children sleep

I clean up the dresser top
Piled up there, each item recounts
The pleasures of deeds done that day

Come tomorrow, fresh and new,

May the pile grow ever higher
With tomorrow's items
Healthy and full of love!

Fallen Blossom

散華

“This is my boy
 The day he graduated from aviation school at Kasumigaura—
 A memento of the time
 He received a gift from the Emperor,”
 I say this, pointing at the desktop photo

In a plaza, walled by red and white curtains,
 In front of another long curtain,
 You, straight as a shoot of bamboo,
 Raise your hand to salute the Emperor
 I vividly feel
 Your pulse, your pride
 But only a few days later, far too soon,
 He was sent to the Navy Base in Oita

May 24, 1939
 7:25 in the evening
 Those numbers—forever, as long as I live—
 Will remain deeply lodged in my body and soul

He joined a night drill
 In preparation for the heavy yet honorable duty
 To which he was about to be called
 They say he asked to lead the aircraft 95 in combat,
 But that evening
 His life concluded at twenty-four years
 As he died, becoming a fallen blossom in the open sky

That was the last of him
His fighter plane crashed
Onto the great plains in Oita, darkness already falling
Dyeing the navy-blue wheat field with burning red
Like a falling meteorite
The officers dashed there, shouting
Who's that? Whose craft? What aircraft number?
His body was clad tight in uniform,
His face hidden in his helmet,
It wasn't easy to identify who he was

One voice screamed, "Lieutenant Colonel Ikeda!"
Tearing through the darkness of night
His comrades-in-arms held their breath
Then called your name like thunder
While surrounding you, my boy

Their cries called him back to life
Using his last strength, he sat,
Held the control stick again
As if to lift his spirit and fly once more
He lasted only half a minute more
They brought him to the Navy Hospital
But despite diligent care,
My boy's soul left this world

In Oita
All wept for his heroic end
Those who knew him and those who did not
Attended the solemn military funeral
All this was written in a heart-felt letter
I received from a perfect stranger

That day
Was the southern sky
Beautiful with a misting of blossoms?
His father hurried there without packing a thing
How he praised our boy, I wonder
His name was written on an honorable flag of death
“Navy Lieutenant Colonel Ikeda, Seventh Court Rank”—My Isamu,
The name you received in honor shines brilliantly

You
Made my wishes come true
Your mother, who adores the blue sky and wide-open ocean,
Had her wishes granted thanks to you
Beautiful both inside and outside, you became
One of the youngest, bravest soldiers of the sea, of Japan, of the Fatherland
Your death is in the utmost honor
I wish for nothing more in this world, for humankind, for myself
There is nothing more I wish to say

I, a nameless woman poet,
Am humble, full of awe.
I say “Long life—*banzai!*—to Your Majesty, the Emperor.”

Rina Kikuchi

Hanabusa Yoshiko

Over the Winter Mountains

-Joining the Kagayaku women's troop
to visit Minato Veterans' Hospital-

冬山を越す

湊病院を慰問する、
輝く部隊の一行に加はり。

"We should have brought some flowers,"
Someone said in the bus.
She was right, no one has flowers
But still we go over the winter mountains
Bearing only our pure hearts

The seaside town of Izu, covered in dust,
Greeted us gloomily
Islands, seagulls, fruit orchards, mountain surfaces
Everything I see makes me cold
Lake Ippeki is the only blue
Turning from the bus
I fill my fountain pen
With the clear water of this lonesome high land

Minato Veterans' Hospital, are we there yet?
Not yet, much, much further
This mountain, that mountain
From the city of Shimoda,
We once more go over the mountains

Rina Kikuchi

Hanabusa Yoshiko

The Battle of Sparrows

雀の闘ひ

In the sunny, quiet sky of autumn
The sparrows fight incessantly
Darkening branches as they gather
Their noisy cries never cease
Some may be wounded but still
Their uproar brings me cheer

One dark night, as dark as a lone house,
I plant spring onions.
Snow-white, straight shoots
Burrow into the cool, soft soil
One by one, they go down deep
As I collect my thoughts

*

I am a triangle-shaped ruler.
If I become edgeless, I will no longer exist.
So, my friends, forgive me.

*

The tree half-felled by the storm,
Is it falling down
Or is it rising up?

*

A rainy day
Are the umbrellas
Feeling joy or grief?
Answer me, with your own ideology

Translator's Notes

The State of My Day

Shikishima: the name of a cigarette brand of the time.

Karukasu crackers: thin, big, round crackers which are like wafers.

Ryukakusan: the brand name of a cold medicine.

Fallen Blossom

The Japanese title, *Sange* (散華), literally means “falling petals” and refers to a Buddhist ritual in which the petals of water lily flowers are scattered. It is meant to purify the place for the god(s) to come down and/or to pay respect to the god(s). However, during war time, *sange* started to be used to refer to dying an honorable death, most likely because the image of petals falling from a tree resembles the aircraft falling from the sky. The beautiful image of falling petals was effectively used to glorify death in war.

Kasumigaura: The name of the city where a military school was located.

Oita: A prefecture in the southern part of Japan. Thus, “the sky in the South” implies the sky in Oita, where the son’s plane crashed.

His father: Hanabusa left her husband and got officially divorced when Isamu was about seven years old. Isamu and his elder sister were raised by a foster mother. The details of her first marriage and how she came to know of Isamu’s death appear in her autobiographical novel, *Waves* (浪, Kōa-Nippon, 1941).

Over the Winter Mountains

Izu: Izu peninsula is 100 km south of Tokyo. It is a heavily forested area with lots of mountains, beautiful beaches, bays and hot springs.

Lake Ippeki: Ippeki literally means “one deep-green lake” in Japanese.

Shimoda: A city in the Izu area.

Commentary

Yoshiko Hanabusa (英美子, 1892–1983) is one of the women pioneers of free-style modern verse, and her first solo poetry collection, *On the White Bridge* (白橋の上に), was published in 1925. She was one of the first five women who managed to publish a solo free-style poetry collection in Japan. Her free-style poems, short stories and essays appeared in various journals and magazines, notably the radical feminist magazine, *Nyonin-geijutsu, Women's Art* (女人藝術, 1928–32). When she was around 30 years old, she abandoned her husband and two children in order to pursue her dream career and become a poet. It was very difficult for a woman to be a wife/mother and a poet at the same time. Many women sacrificed one or the other. An extreme example of this is Misuzu Kaneko (金子みすゞ, 1903–1930), a renowned pre-war woman poet, who chose to kill herself at the age of 26 because her husband did not allow her to write poems.

After the divorce, Hanabusa worked in factories and took many other jobs to financially support herself in Tokyo. She never remarried, but later became a single mother and lived with her son, Atsumasa (1927–). She kept writing and publishing till the end of her life. Her poetry collection, *Town of Disguise* (仮装の町, 1993), was published with a small disc, which records her readings of her own poems.

I hope this selection demonstrates the poetic path many early women free-style poets took, by focusing on her pre-war poems on feminism, women's life, war and imperialism, aesthetics and philosophy.

"The State of My Day" was published in *On the White Bridge* reflecting her everyday life as a mother and a woman with a career. I kept all the Japanese names, such as *Shikishima* and *Karukasu*, in "The State of My Day" in the English translation, though they may be easily deleted. I argue these particular names of cigarettes, crackers and cough medicine bring reality into the poem. The poem is based on the poet's own everyday life, and because of these brand names, the readers can share the familiarity of everyday middle-class family life. It was important for women poets, who were fewer than 10% of all poets

in Japan in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, to write what (they thought) men-poets could not, but only women could, about women's real lives.

I have chosen three poems published in one of the first free-style poetry anthologies of women poets, *Anthology of Contemporary Women Poets* (現代女流詩人集, 1940). War poems such as “Fallen Blossom” and “Over the Winter Mountains” were completely neglected after the surrender of Japan in 1945, mainly because both poets and critics felt ashamed of propaganda poetry in support of war. However, as Hideto Tsuboi points out in his *Celebration of Voices* (声の祝祭, 1997), a reassessment of war poetry is necessary to fully understand the development of Japanese free-style poetry in the twentieth century, and I argue that the war poetry written by women deserves its own position in Japanese literary history.

“Fallen Blossom” is one of the earliest free-style war poems written by women, which reflects the imperialism of wartime Japan. Government imperialism brainwashed almost all Japanese citizens, including intellectual, elite, well-educated women writers and poets with the “Emperor Showa as God” ideology. They were repeatedly taught that Japanese citizens were the emperor's chosen children, whose highest honor was to serve him, implying that sacrificing their own lives for him was their duty as good citizens. Dying for the emperor was taught and believed to be the most honorable act one could achieve in life.

This poem is crucial, not only because it strongly reflects this ideology but also because it demonstrates the paradoxical twist of the feelings of the mother, who is trying to turn her heartbroken sadness into honor. In order to give a meaning to her son's death, the mother tries to believe in the doctrine of Japanese imperialism. The imperialism is used as a means to overcome the tragedy. This poem was written based on Hanabusa's own experience with the death of her son, Isamu.

“Over the Winter Mountains” is also based on her own experience, a visit with her fellow women writers to Minato Veterans' Hospital in Izu area. Hanabusa became a passionate volunteer to help war victims after her son's death. “The Battle of Sparrows” was also published in the same anthology, but it reflects her ideology and philosophy. Many similar epigram-like poems were written by women in pre-war Japan. Such

epigram-like poems have been unfairly disparaged. They express women's struggles to live their lives fully, as well as the fact women can be philosophical and can deal with issues beyond household and motherhood. I believe these early women's poems have their own importance in literary studies as well as in gender studies.

Source texts:

Hanabusa, Yoshiko. "The State of My Day." *Over the White Bridge* [白橋の上に], Masago shuppan, 1925, pp. 110–112.

———. "Fallen Blossom," "Over the Winter Mountains," and "The Battles of Sparrows." *Anthology of Contemporary Women Poets* [現代女流詩人集], Sengabou, 1940, pp.145–159.